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SUBJECT: POPE RETURNS ICON TO ORTHODOX, HOPING FOR THAW IN RELATIONS

Refs: A) Vatican 2671, B) Vatican 1171

Summary

1. (SBU) Pope John Paul II is returning a copy of an historic icon of the Virgin Mary to the Russian Orthodox Church, a gesture he hopes will help thaw relations between Rome and Moscow. The Pope had wanted to return the icon to Moscow in person, but continued coolness from Orthodox Patriarch Alexei II to a Papal visit prompted the Pope to entrust the return to a high-level Vatican delegation. Alexei has downplayed the Pope's conciliatory gesture, taking great pains to emphasize that the image of Our Lady of Kazan is not the revered historic icon, but "one of many copies." The recent visit to Rome by the Ecumenical Patriarch of Constantinople, Bartholomew I (ref a), and a few hopeful signs for Catholics in Russia have given the Vatican's Orthodox watchers some hope for better times in this ecumenical relationship. However, the predominant view in Vatican City is that that this gesture is unlikely to be reciprocated as long as Alexei II remains Patriarch. End Summary.

Icon Returns to Russia

2. (U) Pope John Paul II has decided to return a copy of an historic icon of the Virgin Mary to the Russian Orthodox Church. At a farewell event in Vatican City August 25, the Pontiff expressed his hope that the gesture would contribute to efforts to bring Rome and Moscow a step closer to unity. The icon, a copy of the precious Madonna of Kazan, probably dating from the seventeenth or eighteenth century, was likely taken out of Russia in the early twentieth century. It changed hands several times in ensuing years until it was exhibited at the World's Fair in New York in 1964-65. An American Catholic organization later bought the icon, and gave it to the Pope in 1993. Although John Paul II would have preferred to return the icon personally, the cool response to his wish by Orthodox Patriarch Alexei II left the Pope with little choice but to entrust the task to a high-level Vatican delegation led by the Head of the Pontifical Council for Christian Unity, Cardinal Walter Kasper. Kasper and his team, including Washington's Cardinal Theodore McCarrick, will hold talks with Orthodox officials on the margins of the hand-over ceremony scheduled for August 28 (ref b).

Patriarch Downplays Gesture

3. (U) Orthodox Patriarch Alexei II has downplayed the Pope's conciliatory gesture, taking great pains to emphasize that the image of Our Lady of Kazan is not the revered historic icon, but "one of many copies." When the Vatican floated the idea that the Pope might personally present Alexei with the icon, the Russian prelate told journalists that there was no reason for the Pope to be involved in the transfer, since the icon is not the original. The Patriarch further called for the Holy See to match its gesture with actions in putting an end to what it regards as proselytism among Russia's Orthodox communities - a charge the Vatican rejects

But Other Orthodox See Goodwill

4. (U) Despite the lack of authenticity, public interest in the icon has been high, and the gesture has been widely seen as a sincere effort to improve relations with the Orthodox Church. A large crowd, including Orthodox clergy, took part in the August 25 weekly Papal audience at which the Pope bade farewell to the icon, which he has kept in his private chapel. The Pope responded to one of them in a voice stronger than we have heard recently, saying that "it is with deep emotion that I . . . give thanks to Divine Providence which has allowed me today to send to the

venerable Patriarch of Moscow and all Russians, the gift of this holy icon." At the end of the ceremony Catholic and Orthodox clergy processed out of the hall together. Rome-based media have reported enthusiasm for the Pope's gesture from Orthodox clergy in Rome, and noted that a group of Moscow Catholics has asked Catholic Archbishop Tadeusz Kondrusiewicz if it can venerate the icon when it arrives in Russia. However, Kondrusiewicz made it clear that ecumenical courtesy would mean Patriarch Alexei would be

the first to see the icon.

Some Good News from Russia

15. (U) While the Pope has not gotten his long-awaited invitation to Russia, the Holy See has been buoyed by recent news that the Russian government has given the Catholic diocese of Saratov full legal recognition. Similar status has already been given to the Catholic archdiocese in Moscow, and church officials are hoping to have the same courtesy extended to the remaining two dioceses in Siberia. The legal status facilitates the churches activities, including new construction and education.

Comment: Low Expectations of Alexei

6.(SBU) Alexei's dismissive attitude towards Vatican reconciliation efforts has been a constant in Catholic Russian Orthodox relations in recent years. The Patriarch has repeatedly condemned alleged Catholic proselytism on Orthodox turf and warned against Rome's initiatives to shore up its presence in Russia by elevating the status of its ecclesiastical jurisdictions. From the Holy See's perspective, it seems that all gestures of rapprochement are automatically snubbed and treated with paranoid suspicion.

17. (SBU) Despite Alexei's continued snubs, Pope John Paul II and the Vatican can be expected to continue their efforts to reach out to the Russian Orthodox. However, it is clear that this relationship will remain more difficult than the more promising relations the Holy See enjoys with Ecumenical Patriarch Bartholomew, the "first among equals" in the Orthodox world. The Holy See knows that its gestures towards the Russian Orthodox are unlikely to be reciprocated in any meaningful way while Alexei II is Patriarch. Nevertheless, the Vatican, with its ability to take the long view, is willing to wait -- having already survived the more than ten centuries of separation between the two churches. In the meantime, the Holy See will continue to press for closer cooperation and "communion" to combat what it regards as the common threat to the Roman Catholic and Orthodox worlds from Europe's aggressive secularism. End comment.

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